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SUBJECT: SENATOR DOLE EXPRESSES SUPPORT FOR WOMEN MINISTERS

REF: BAGHDAD 1719

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) On May 28, Ambassador and Senator Elizabeth Dole (R-NC) met with Minister of Human Rights Wijdan Mikhail Salim and Minister of State for Women's Affairs Fatin Abd al-Rahman to congratulate each Minister and express support for their work to expand women's rights. The Ministers expressed gratitude and indicated that they would both appreciate USG assistance to strengthen their ministries and programs. When asked how their ministries could be supported, Minister Wijdan responded that her ministry staff needs more training, especially regarding women's and children's issues. Minister Fatin made a general request for funding but did not identify specific areas for support. Both Ministers highlighted the newness of each of their respective ministries and acknowledged that it would take some time for the ministries to reach their full potential.

¶2. (C) When asked their opinion about Personal Status Law 188, which governs procedures related to marriages, divorce, and other related topics, Fatin opined tentatively that the personal status law should not be changed. Wijdan, in contrast, argued that Iraqis should have the right to go through civil (vice religious) procedures if they so chose (COMMENT: thereby implicitly indicating that the Personal Status Law should be changed. END COMMENT).

¶3. (C) When asked whether the constitution would be able to sufficiently protect women's rights, Wijdan asserted that, although certain provisions may on face value protect women's rights, implementation of the law would be the true test of whether equal opportunity would be protected. Wijdan further noted that years of tradition regarding women's inferior role in Iraq would be difficult to overcome.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: In contrast to Wijdan, Minister Fatin (a conservative Sunni) seemed hesitant and somewhat reserved during the brief introductory meeting. She was not vocal in expressing her opinions and did not seem to completely understand questions on the status of women's rights under current law. Like Wijdan (ref), she did not realize that she was being nominated as a minister until she watched the inauguration ceremony on television. She is a lawyer by training, a member of the Iraqi Islamic Party, and until very recently lived in Hillah with her husband and two small daughters. COMMENT.
KHALILZAD